

Battle over voter map begins

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*Plans differ for
nonwhite districts*

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BATON ROUGE — The potential heavyweight bouts materialized Sunday as the Louisiana Legislature convened a special session to redraw legislative, congressional and other political boundaries using 2010 census figures.

Topping the fight card over the next three weeks: differences over the number of majority-nonwhite legislative districts and whether to fundamentally redraw existing congressional districts to create a district along the Interstate 20 corridor in north Louisiana.

There's also the small matter of legislative lines in southeast Louisiana, which suffered significant population losses south of Lake Pontchartrain and significant gains everywhere else. And, of course, there's the usual jockeying anytime a group of elected officials has to redraw boundaries with the next election on the



See SESSION, A-3

Justice Department must approve new electoral maps

SESSION, from A-1

horizon.

There are powerful figures at play in each debate, from Gov. Bobby Jindal, sitting congressmen and the Legislature's presiding officers down to veteran lawmakers who know how to maneuver in a session that occurs just once every decade. That dynamic yielded a palpable tension Sunday, even as gregarious lawmakers greeted one another after months away from the Capitol.

"This is when everybody still likes each other," Rep. Jane Smith, R-Bossier City, mused shortly before Jindal addressed the House and Senate together.

The governor took six minutes to play down the inevitable skirmishes and emphasize Louisiana's political tradition of bipartisan deal-makers. But he avoided specifics, instead framing the session as an important test of democratic values.

"We should never take for granted that our leaders work for us, not the other way around," Jindal said. "Some describe this process as the elected leaders selecting their voters. But in reality, the purpose of this session is more important than that."

Number of nonwhite districts

House Speaker Jim Tucker and Senate President Joel Chaisson II each have proposed increasing the number of majority-nonwhite districts in their respective chambers. But the Legislative Black Caucus wants an additional majority-nonwhite district in both chambers.

Rep. Rick Gallot, D-Ruston, is chairman of the House redistricting panel and a member of the Black Caucus. Gallot won't say whether he is at odds with Tucker — who appointed Gallot as chairman — over the House map, but the chairman hasn't signed on as a co-author of Tucker's redistricting bill that will be heard in Gallot's committee beginning this morning.

Tucker proposes 29 majority-nonwhite districts. The Black

Caucus wants a 30th in Shreveport, essentially by reducing the concentration of African-Americans in districts on the speaker's map. Tucker said that could result in the election of two white representatives from majority-nonwhite districts, a circumstance that already creates the current 80 percent white legislative roster in a state where a third of the residents are African-American.

In the Senate, Chaisson carves out a new majority-African-American district by redrawing two existing districts in northern Louisiana. The result would be one majority-African-American district and a clear majority-white district.

The U.S. Justice Department will have to approve the congressional and legislative maps, vetting them for any "discriminatory intent" or "discriminatory effect." There is no legal requirement, however, to maximize the number of minority representatives.

An I-20 district?

The congressional battle pits Gallot against his Senate counterpart, Robert Kostelka, R-Monroe. Gallot — pointing to input from civic and business leaders in Monroe and Shreveport who want to share a single district — wants to draw an east-west oriented district from Texas to Mississippi, roughly along the Interstate 20 corridor. The debate is a key piece of a map that must have only six districts, one less than the current seven.

Kostelka wants to maintain the existing north-south oriented districts that currently separate Shreveport and Monroe. He proposes extending both districts farther south to pick up the necessary population.

"All of the congressmen like it but (3rd District U.S. Rep. Jeff) Landry," he said. His plan puts Landry, a New Iberia lawyer elected last fall, into the same congressional district as U.S. Rep. Charles Boustany, R-Lafayette.

Perhaps as important, Kostelka has Jindal's support. "We have told lawmakers that we want the two north Louisiana districts"

running north-south, Jindal's chief of staff Timmy Teepell said Sunday. Teepell said the administration otherwise is sitting out the session.

Kostelka said he expects some congressmen or their aides to be at the first hearing of the Senate and Governmental Affairs Committee, which he scheduled for Tuesday. The chairman said the Jindal administration has not talked to him about which plan it prefers.

Gallot said his congressional plans follows public demand for grouping "communities of interest" together: Shreveport with Monroe, Lake Charles with Lafayette, and Houma with Thibodaux.

"If Sen. Kostelka and the administration want a plan that disregards the public input, then that's something they will have to explain," he said.

Sen. Lydia Jackson, D-Shreveport, said the I-20 plan is more logical than two districts down the eastern and western spines of the state. "It is a big change for Louisiana, but it makes sense," she said.

Race and party also are factors. Jackson noted that there is no way to draw a second African-American congressional district beyond the 2nd District in southern Louisiana. But the Gallot-Jackson I-20 district would be 42 percent African-American, giving a black candidate — or any Democrat — a reasonable chance.

Gallot's committee will convene today at 9 a.m. to take up Tucker's House plan, with the congressional map to follow as early as Wednesday. Chaisson said he wants senators to review the various redistricting plans for the Senate and Congress today before starting hearings on Tuesday.

Six other House panels will meet today to review bills to change state population-based laws to conform to the 2010 Census data. The full House will go in session at 5 p.m. today. The Senate is off until 5 p.m. Tuesday, but its committees will look at the census-based laws Tuesday afternoon.